Damage to temples in Bangladesh

265. SHRI KARNENDU BHATTACHARJEE: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government's attention has been drawn to the news-item captioned, "Temple burnt, idols in 3 attacks in Bangladesh" appearing in the Asian Age dated the 9th October, 2002;

(b) if so, the details thereof and Government's reaction thereto; and

(c) the steps taken/proposed to be taken to take up the matter with the Government of Bangladesh and impress upon them the need to protect the religious freedom of the minorities in that country?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH): (a) Yes.

(b) and (c) There were reports of some attacks on temples and puja mandaps during the recent Durga Puja festival in Bangladesh. Following the attacks, Government of Bangladesh had issued instructions for providing special security including deployment of Bangladesh Rifles to ensure peaceful celebrations of Durga Puja. The Home Minister and other senior leaders publicly assured the minorities of the Government's commitment to ensuring peaceful celebrations of Durga Puja. Following the tight security measures, the Durga Puja celebrations were held in 17000 puja mandaps throughout the country.

Earlier, after the elections in Bangladesh in October 2001, the Government had noted with serious concern reports of attacks on minorities in Bangladesh. This was taken up at various levels including at the highest level with the Government of Bangladesh. Action has been reportedly initiated on many of the perpetrators of the violence.

Cancellation of Deputy Prime Minister's Russia visit

266. SHRI KARNENDU BHATTACHARJEE: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Deputy Prime Minister was scheduled to visit Russia sometime in mid-October 2002;

(b) whether the proposed visit could not materialise due to the sudden cancellation of the visit by the Russian Government; and

(c) if so, the reasons provided by the Russian Government therefor?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI YASHWANT SINHA): (a) Yes.

(b) and (c) It was envisaged that the visit would include, *inter alia*, meetings of the Hon'ble Deputy Prime Minister with the leadership of the Russian Federation including the President. Since mutually convenient time for all these meetings on the dates proposed for the visit could not be found, it was decided to defer the visit by mutual consent of both sides.

Comparison of Gujarat with Jammu and Kashmir by US

267. SHRI KARNENDU BHATTACHARJEE: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government's attention has been drawn to the news-item which appeared in the Deccan Chronicle on the 4th October, 2002 under the caption "Clinton compares Gujarat to J.K.: US Commission says Sangh Parivar responsible for religious hatred";

(b) if so, Government's reaction thereto; and

(c) the steps proposed to be taken to obliterate the widespread impression prevalent in the foreign countries that India has not done enough to ensure the protection of minorities?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI YASHWANT SINHA): (a) Yes.

(b) Government reject any comparison between Gujarat and Jammu & Kashmir. The U.S. Commission on International regligious Freedom is a non-official body mandated by the U.S. Congress. Government consider its report part of the internal process of a foreign government. We reject any interference in India's internal affairs. It is well known that the Constitution of India guarantees equal religious, social and political rights to all its citizens, including minorities.